

Poking a Dead Frog: Conversations with Today's Top Comedy Writers

By Mike Sacks

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A *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER
NAMED A BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR BY NPR

Amy Poehler, Mel Brooks, Adam McKay, George Saunders, Bill Hader, Patton Oswalt, and many more take us deep inside the mysterious world of comedy in this fascinating, laugh-out-loud-funny book. Packed with behind-the-scenes stories—from a day in the writers' room at *The Onion* to why a sketch does or doesn't make it onto *Saturday Night Live* to how the BBC nearly erased the entire first season of *Monty Python's Flying Circus—Poking a Dead Frog* is a must-read for comedy buffs, writers and pop culture junkies alike.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A series of rich, intimate conversations about the ins and outs of turning funny ideas into real-world art….[Sacks] dives deep with everyone from *Saturday Night Live* lifer James Downey to *Cheers* creator Glen Charles to Mel Brooks, and every interview is refreshingly candid. Sacks asks the right questions…to inspire lively conversations….As a sort of expert witness to comedy's history, he's reverent, though his subjects are also clearly chosen because they understand the absurdity of their own vocation. He pokes and prods just enough to reveal some guts, and most of the time they're just as fascinating as what's on the surface."
—A.V. Club, The Onion

"A fascinating look into the ways stand-up comedians, directors, and even short stories authors write funny….An absolute must."
—Flavorwire

"A greater look into the craft and business of comedy writing than you can find anywhere else….A comedy nerd bible."
—Splitsider

"Filled with intelligent conversations… Even if you're not interested in a comedy writing career, at least you'll get great suggestions for your Netflix queue."
—NPR, 2014's "Great Reads"

"[A] pleasingly thick work, born to be well thumbed."
—Los Angeles Times

"[Mike Sacks'] conversations with humorists poke at some fundamental concepts of comedy without chloroforming any frogs. More revealingly, the book examines what kind of person comes to make a living putting funny words on paper."
—Wall Street Journal

"Short chapters offering 'Ultraspecific Comedic Knowledge'…should be of particular interest to anyone thinking about pursuing a career in comedy. The longer interviews should be of interest to pretty much anybody."
—The New York Times Book Review

"The true usefulness of *Poking a Dead Frog* to an aspiring comedy writer is in its clear-eyed picture of the gritty inner workings of the comedy industry….Reading about how a joke goes from the mind of a writer to an episode of *Community* is like watching a magician reveal his secrets: Sure, it dispels some of the magic, but it inspires new reverence for the real skill that went into producing the effect."
—Slate

"An effort to understand what elicits the guffaw [and] an investigation of the comedic mind and how it works…. *Poking a Dead Frog* also surprises as a how-to-get-in-the-business kind of book, a thread that holds valid entertainment value….Amid these [stories of] wild successes, we get insights into *what* is

funny, *why* it is funny, and just how *hard* it is to write the perfect joke….If you have members of your family who dream of being a comedy writer, give them this book."
—***Paste***

"Unusually insightful…Sacks teases deep wisdom from comedy titans."
—***Departures***

"[These] intimate discussions of comedy in all its forms are engaging, and Sacks's obvious passion is contagious. Whether writers themselves or just fans of funny, humor-loving readers will relish *Poking a Dead Frog*."
—***ShelfAwareness***

"Fascinating interviews with some comedic heavy hitters…full of great moments that are funny, thought provoking, and poignant. If a casual humor enthusiast can appreciate the work this much, the book is going to be snapped up by comedy writers and aficionados."
—***Library Journal,* starred review**

"[An] excellent book…[Sacks] once again displays his ability to get fascinating and honest interviews from comic luminaries."
—***Publishers Weekly***

"If you're a fan of funny — and who isn't? — you're sure to find something of interest in Sacks' follow-up to *And Here's the Kicker*."
—***New York Post***

"No one generates more interesting, revealing, entertaining interviews than Mike Sacks. His love and knowledge of comedy are apparent, and, as a result, the fascinating and sometimes tight-lipped comedy greats open up to him in ways they rarely do. *Poking a Dead Frog* is a classic."
—**Bob Odenkirk, co-creator of *Mr. Show* and former writer, *Saturday Night Live***

"This book is what I really look forward to in a book about humor: rich with words and humor, and funny stories with words. Thank you for your time."
—**Will Ferrell**

"These interviews go to dark depths and offer useful, applicable insight into how excellent comedy is written. If you read it, you're going to be better at writing comedy and may even wind up in a position where you can take jobs away from the younger interviewees. I specify the younger interview subjects because some of the older ones will die soon."
—**Rob Delaney**

"I wish I'd had a book like this when I was trying to break in. Also, a book on personal hygiene."
—**Jack Handey, author of *Deep Thoughts* and *The Stench of Honolulu***

"There are few better interviewers than Mike Sacks. *Poking a Dead Frog* is a must-read for any comedy nerd or fan of pop culture history."
—**Dana Brown, *Vanity Fair***

About the Author

Mike Sacks is the author of three previous books including *And Here's the Kicker: Conversations with 21 Top Humor Writers on Their Craft*. Currently on the editorial staff of *Vanity Fair*, he has also written for the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *McSweeney's*, *Vice*, and *Salon*.

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INTRODUCTION

The late comedy writer Jerry Belson, a veteran of The Dick Van Dyke Show, The Odd Couple, and The Drew Carey Show, among other classic sitcoms, wrote a joke that became one of the most well known, and most retold, in the history of television. It's from a 1973 episode of The Odd Couple:

"Never ASSUME. Because when you assume, you make an ASS of U and ME."

The joke is undeniably great. But perhaps the best and most effective joke that Belson ever wrote—and he wrote untold thousands—is the inscription that he wanted engraved on his tombstone:

I DID IT THEIR WAY

In other words: Hollywood's way. The executives' way. The wrong way.

Belson's tombstone epitaph never made it beyond the first-draft stage, but regardless, one would think that Belson had done it his way. Plenty of credits. Plenty of money. Plenty of respect from those within the industry. And yet, if there's one motif evident in the lives of comedy writers, it's the nagging feeling that one can never have it his or her own way. That a comedy writer must always genuflect to those with the power, with the money—those who deem themselves arbiters of What Is Funny.

Whether through executive negligence or creative bartering on the part of the writers, the most beloved comedies of our time have avoided this trap. When Monty Python created their four-season television series, Flying Circus, they did so with minimal help from the BBC. In fact, as one of the Pythons, Terry Jones, explains in this book, BBC executives were disinterested in the result—until they saw the final product. Then they came terribly close to erasing the entirety of Monty Python's first season for the grand purpose of reusing the tapes to record more "serious" entertainment.

The creators of The Simpsons made it clear from the show's inception that there would be no executive meddling. James L. Brooks, also interviewed in this book, declared, in essence, Stay away from our jokes, and we will produce a show for the ages. Actually, Brooks might have hired a lawyer to say as much in very clear legalese, rather than "in essence." Whatever the case, Brooks saved the show and helped to create a classic.

The creators of the U.K. version of The Office, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, flew so low under the radar that by the time executives became even vaguely aware of what their money had wrought, it was too late. Due to this neglect, the show set an influential precedent for its combination documentary-style format and cringe-inducing humor.

It's clear then: All great comedy has managed to circumnavigate executive meddling. But this is easier said than done.

Since at least the fifth century B.C., when the playwright Aristophanes needed the financial help of a chorêgos, or rich benefactor, to help stage his comedies, writers have had to rely on others. The creative have never been fully in control of the marketing and distribution of their creativity. Playwrights have needed sponsors and performance space. Screenwriters have required even wealthier sponsors than the playwrights:

Hollywood production studios. Humor writers for print have needed the acceptance, and then distribution, provided by magazines and publishing houses. The keys to the kingdom have been controlled by the less creative.

Until now.

I cannot overstate that there has never been a better time for writers of comedy—or, for that matter, writers of anything. A twenty-one-year-old in her room in Oklahoma who writes hilarious jokes on Twitter is potentially just as important (or influential) as any professional comedy writer for The New Yorker. A teen making funny videos in his suburban garage can reach just as many people—certainly, just as many of the right people—than any director of a movie to be distributed by the large studios.

We are now all on equal ground. If you want to write comedy, you can. There's no one to stop you. And there's no one to tell you what to do. This can be bad. It's far too easy to create sloppy, forgettable work. On the other hand, it's no longer a requirement to work on The Harvard Lampoon to eventually earn a professional living writing jokes. That can only be a good thing.

It is also so much easier to communicate with our peers and mentors than ever before. We can access material in a few seconds and reach out to others almost instantly. I have fond memories of growing up in suburban Maryland, biking to the local library to look for inspiration, and staying up late to watchLetterman and whatever obscure, random shows that might air in the wee hours. I compiled dozens of files of clippings and took them with me when I went to college and everywhere else I eventually moved. Many of these clips were written by comedy writers; others were in-depth interviews with comedy writers. I pored over the mastheads of my favorite humor publications and the credits for the shows that I thought were the funniest. I occasionally wrote to these writers, seeking advice or attempting to sell jokes.

This book is really an extension of my youthful attempts to contact those in the business whom I admired most. If there is a common trait among those I chose to interview for this book, it's that each of these writers has always done it his or her own way and no one else's. Each came to this business primarily because he or she wanted to create the sort of comedy that they themselves enjoyed the most. For all of them—be they writers of sketches, graphic novels, screenplays, New Yorker cartoons, fiction, nonfiction, television, stand-up, the radio—success was a by-product, not the goal.

I am no humor expert; I don't think anyone is. If something makes you laugh, it's good. But if there is anything about which I am certain, it's that we are now living in a comedic Golden Age.

Never before have there been as many comedy writers in the early stages of their careers producing the type of work that means the most to them and to others. By the time my five-year-old daughter reaches my age, most, if not all, of the young writers in this book will have already become the comedy legends of the next generation. Who are these writers? How did they choose this very odd profession? What do they want to accomplish? How exactly do they do what they do? And, perhaps most important, why? One of the reasons I wrote this book was to find out and to share what I learned with others who might find all this of interest, too.

Luckily, there also still exist a good number of elder statespersons of "classic" TV comedies, film, and radio. Soon this ratio will be tipped more toward the young, and a bridge to another time will no longer exist. This is another reason I decided to write this book. How do these older writers want to be remembered? How do they think they changed the industry? Who influenced them? I feel lucky to have been able to connect with these older comedy writers, some of whom have not been interviewed in many years or at all.

The writers in this book have played major parts in everything from creating what's been called the first-ever

sitcom to coining the term "black humor" to writing for Monty Python, Cheers, The Office (both the U.K. and U.S. versions), Saturday Night Live, The Daily Show, The Onion, The Colbert Report,Parks and Recreation, National Lampoon, The New Yorker, Seinfeld, Mr. Show, Bob's Burgers, 30 Rock, Anchorman, Juno, Ghost World, Get a Life, Cabin Boy, Late Night, Late Show with David Letterman, the Tonight Show, and more. A writer or two may have even written the jokes you read this very morning online.

Interspersed throughout this book, between the fifteen full-length interviews, are "Ultraspecific Comedic Knowledge" and "Pure, Hard-Core Advice." The former includes specialized materials and information that might appeal to the comedy geek. "Pure, Hard-Core Advice," as you may have guessed, contains straight advice—no muss, no fuss—from successful comedy writers or those within the industry, such as agents, that might prove helpful to writers just starting out or for those writers wanting to improve their standing in the industry.

If you're not familiar with some (or even most) of these writers, I hope that you will find them as interesting as I do and seek out their work. If you arefamiliar with these writers, I hope you might learn something new about their writing, their careers, their lives—and their humor.

As E. B. White once wrote for The New Yorker: "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind. . . . [Humor] won't stand much poking. It has a certain fragility, an evasiveness, which one had best respect." This bit of wisdom is often misquoted or, at least, cut short, with the second half making no appearance. Yes, it's true that the poor frog dies (and as the owner of five dearly departed African clawed water frogs, this strikes particularly close to home). But the crux is that the process can be fascinating to a certain type of person.

Not the type who wants comedy dissected to the point of death, necessarily, but the type interested in understanding the art and business behind comedy; of what it takes, exactly, to make a career out of attempting to induce laughter from complete strangers with only the words or images that you create. It is a fragile art. And as you will read here, it is a tough, yet fascinating life. These are writers who do it their way (and always have), and the rest of us, as well as the world of comedy, are much better off for their efforts.

—MIKE SACKS

JAMES DOWNEY

Saturday Night Live has employed hundreds of comedy writers in its four decades on the air, but no writer has been associated with the show longer—or had more of a lasting impact—than James Woodward Downey. If Lorne Michaels is the face of Saturday Night Live, Downey is its behind-the-scenes creative force.

Downey first began to consider the possibility of making a living as a writer while at Harvard, where he served as president of the Harvard Lampoon. There he caught the attention of writers Michael O'Donoghue and Doug Kenney (both already stars at The National Lampoon), who suggested he come work with them in New York. But after graduating in 1974, with a major in Russian studies, he decided instead to accept a fellowship to tour Eastern Europe by way of ship and train. After a few run-ins with the KGB, and after meeting a Hungarian who partly inspired the "Wild and Crazy Guys" sketches he would later co-write with Marilyn Miller and Dan Aykroyd, Downey headed back to the U.S. and saw, for the first time, a new televised comedy show that he had only heard about through friends. "As soon as I saw it, I thought, 'Oh, this is hilarious,'" Downey says. "I would love to be a part of that."

After submitting a ten-page packet to Michaels that included a short piece about his pet peeves—"I guess my biggest pet peeve is when you're just sitting there, waiting for a bus, and a guy runs up with one of those

fileting knives and opens up your intestines and takes one end of it and runs down the street screaming, 'Ha ha! Got your entrails!'"—Downey was hired by Lorne "more based on instinct, I have to believe, than on the packet itself." He became one of the first Harvard Lampoon writers to break into TV comedy writing, setting a precedent that would change comedy-writing rooms thereafter. "Jim Downey is Patient Zero," said Mike Reiss, a former Harvard Lampooner and long-time Simpsons show-runner.

After finding his feet, Downey—the show's youngest writer—began to make a deep impact on Saturday Night Live, working closely with, among others, Bill Murray (with whom he shared an office for four years), Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Jane Curtin, and Laraine Newman. For the last four decades, Downey has worked with and written for every star the show has produced, including Martin Short, Jon Lovitz, Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Chris Farley, Norm Macdonald, Phil Hartman, Dana Carvey, Jan Hooks, Rob Schneider, Adam Sandler, Will Ferrell, Bill Hader, Amy Poehler, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Fred Armisen, Kenan Thompson, and dozens of others. Downey is one consistent on a show that has experienced an untold amount of changes, and has throughout earned a reputation as being a kind, patient mentor to countless young writers (most of whom he personally hired), including Jack Handey, George Meyer, Robert Smigel, and Conan O'Brien. "If anyone taught all of the young writers how to properly write a sketch," Smigel says, "it was Jim Downey."

Called by Michaels the best political humorist alive, Downey has been responsible for most of the political-centered pieces during Saturday Night Live's run (many of which he co-wrote with now Senator Al Franken), starting with Jimmy Carter in the mid-'70s and ending, five administrations later, with Barack Obama. The power of Downey's political comedy extends beyond laughs; more impressively, his work has influenced the actual political landscape. In 2008—during a live, televised debate seen by millions—Hillary Clinton referred to one of Downey's recent sketches to make her point that perhaps the press was going just a bit too easy on her opponent. "I just find it curious," she said, "if anybody saw Saturday Night Live . . . maybe we should ask Barack if he's comfortable and needs another pillow?"

In 2013, after working on SNL off and on for thirty-three of its thirty-eight seasons—and serving as head writer for Late Night with David Letterman in 1982 for two years (where he created the Top Ten List)—Downey retired from the show, and now divides his time between New York City and rural upstate New York, where he hopes to achieve his goal of "harmless eccentric."

Do you have any comedy pet peeves?

What has bothered me most for the last few years is that kind of lazy, political comedy, very safe but always pretending to be brave, that usually gets what my colleague Seth Meyers calls "clapter." Clapter is that earnest applause, with a few "whoops" thrown in, that lets you know the audience agrees with you, but what you just said wasn't funny enough to actually make them laugh.

Bill Maher is a funny guy, but he seems to prefer clapter instead of laughs. A lot of his material runs to the "white people are lame and stupid and racist" trope. It congratulates itself on its edginess, but it's just the ass-kissiest kind of comedy going, reassuring his status-anxious audience that there are some people they're smarter than.

My own politics are sort of all over the place in terms of issues, but as far as the writing goes, the only important thing is that it's funny, and that it's an original comment. That the audience agrees with me isn't necessary and probably isn't even a good thing. It's so easy to coast by, just hitting the same familiar notes you know are popular and have been pretested for effectiveness. The audience will always at least applaud, so you never have to risk silence.

How about pet-peeves specific to Saturday Night Live?

Celebrity walk-ons bother me. I remember there was a piece from the final show in 2009—Will Ferrell was hosting—and he's sitting in a restaurant with a few buddies, one was Bill Hader, and they were talking about Will's experience in Vietnam. And Will starts singing the Billy Joel song "Goodnight Saigon." It ends with the lyrics, "And we'd all go down together. And we'd all go down together." What started out as a comedy sketch quickly became a vehicle for name-droppy celebrity walk-ons. And by airtime there were about thirty-five celebrities in that piece. It became a massive wankathon, star-fucking extravaganza. Some of the other writers had predicted the piece wouldn't survive dress, and I would have said the same thing after read-through, but when I learned that Anne Hathaway, Tom Hanks, Paul Rudd, and so on were going to appear, I knew it would be the least likely piece to go. "I absolutely flat guarantee you the piece will make air, and if the show starts to spread, that piece will be protected. It is a pure display of star-fucking power."

And sure enough it ran, even though funnier pieces were cut to make room for it, including a great sketch by the same writer. I suppose it's all part of the business, but, to me, that seemed almost like a commercial. But, hey, it pays the bills.

How about appearances by such quasi-celebrities as Monica Lewinsky or Paris Hilton?

I found it especially embarrassing when Paris Hilton hosted the show [in 2005]. What was really humiliating was that, on that very same week, South Park was doing that brilliant "Stupid Spoiled Whore-Off" piece that just annihilated her. The contrast was dramatic and not to our advantage.

And then when Monica Lewinsky was on the show in May 1999, that was the week poor Cuba Gooding Jr. was hosting, and apparently he became increasingly annoyed as the shape of the show became more of a cohosting thing: "With Cuba Gooding and Monica Lewinsky." And I don't blame the guy at all.

I wrote something for Monica Lewinsky that week that she refused to do. It was hardly a savage piece, just one of those C-Span histories about presidential inaugurations; in this case, the history of the presidential knee pads. How during the Andrew Jackson administration there were knee pads made of hickory and leather, forged by harness makers and so on. And we were working our way through history up to Monica. In the piece, all she had to do was stand there, and Kenny G —played by Jimmy Fallon—was going to serenade Monica with a creepy saxophone solo. I watched her read the piece and she was like, "No, not interested," rather contemptuously, as if it weren't up to her standard. You know, the Monica Lewinsky standard.

I thought the piece was funny in and of itself, but I'd also add that it would have helped her, and us, by letting her do some penance, by acknowledging that we booked her for her scandal value.

This, to me, was a real indicator that the show was well past the days when we could book strange types of hosts and music acts like [old-timey guitarist and singer] Leon Redbone or ['70s punk group] Fear, just because we thought it might be interesting. When the show was coming to its last year of the original cast and writers, in 1980, as sort of a graduation present Lorne said that each of us could pick either a musical or a guest host. Just imagine that. I chose Strother Martin, a character actor I'd been obsessed with since Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid [in which he played a boss at a Bolivian mine]. He was also in Sam Peckinpah westerns, and was the prison warden in [1967's] Cool Hand Luke. He was a great, great host.

The notion that we could ever in the modern era book anyone like Strother Martin again is unthinkable. These were just people we liked and wanted to present to the public. The issue of ratings never came up, and the episodes that did get smash ratings at the time were sort of unpredictable.

Over the years, have you noticed any specific traits that a performer must have in order to successfully host the show?

When the hosts come in, they can either be walking premises—certain hosts can just bring certain ideas to audiences, like [NFL quarterback] Tom Brady or Senator John McCain—or they can be just really funny people who are not necessarily great actors but have great comedic minds—Conan O'Brien or Jon Stewart. Or they can be really brilliant actors who aren't necessarily known for being funny but can be wonderful with the right script.

One host, in particular, I just loved was Nicolas Cage, who was there in 1992. He played this kind of passion, this innocence, so beautifully. He was great in everything he did. Jeff Goldblum was like that, too. He was a brilliant comic performer—perhaps not the funniest guy to hang out with—but he approached it as an actor. "What's my motivation? How do I do this?" And then he goes out and he's perfect. Justin Timberlake is another favorite. He started off as mainly a cool presence, but as he's matured, he's become a very funny actor and performer. And he brings that straight line with him, the lady killer.

But of course some of them turn out to be better live performers than others. As a host, you do have to surrender control to us [the writers], which is why we always feel a sense of responsibility for anyone willing to put himself in such a vulnerable position. We have a thing about not bad-mouthing them, although some people have occasionally broken that rule here and there. It's like Alcoholics Anonymous. What goes on in private, when you're here, stays here.

With that said, there have been some terrible hosts over the years, including an infamously bad 1991 show with actor Steven Seagal at the helm.

Yes, that was a case where it was all we could do not to talk about what a douchebag he was.

What was his specific problem? Did he refuse to do what was necessary to put on a good show?

Well, I guess now it can be told. He was just so fucking stupid. Rob Schneider had the funniest idea for a monologue. It was Seagal coming out and doing the "You know, I've obviously made my career with action pictures, like Hard to Kill and Out for Justice and so on." Applause, applause. "I don't want to apologize for them, I think they were good. But the fact is I've moved past that. To me, it's all about the music now." Then he was going to pick up a guitar and perform a very moving version of [the 1974 hit song by Carl Douglas] "Kung Fu Fighting." Not a rockin' one, but playing it like it was "Amazing Grace" or something. Real slowly: "Everybody was . . . kung fu fighting. Those cats . . . those cats were fast . . . as fast as lightning." And I thought it was a really hilarious idea. So of course, Seagal steps out on stage and decides to go with his "instincts," which were to play it loud and badass, like a Hollywood actor with his own band. It's like when you go to a barbecue joint and realize, "Oh fuck, we came on blues night? Damn!" And you can't have a conversation because the fifty-five-year-old guy is really rocking out.

You worked at SNL longer than any other writer in the show's history. And yet as respected as you are, you were actually fired by NBC for a season, beginning in 1998.

Well, that was all due to [then NBC executive] Don Ohlmeyer. Norm Macdonald, the anchor for Weekend Update, and I were writing a lot of jokes about O.J. Simpson, and we had been doing so for more than three years. Don, being good friends with O.J., had just had enough.

Your O.J. jokes were not light taps on the head. These were jokes that would often end with: "Because O.J. murdered two people."

Yeah, we weren't holding back. [Laughs] That's the thing I kind of liked about Don, actually: His friendship with O.J. was so old school. It was so un-showbizzy. He ended up firing me, as well as Norm, but I can't honestly say that a part of me doesn't respect Don for his loyalty. Most people in show business would sell

out anyone in their lives, for any reason at all, including for practice. Don was the opposite. He threw a party for the jurors after the 1995 acquittal. And he stuck with O.J. through it all.

I don't know that Norm enjoyed the experience of the firing quite as much as I did, but to me it was exciting. It was certainly the best press I ever received. We got tremendous support from people I really admire, some of whom are friends and some I didn't really know that well, but who stepped up and called me. It was a fun time.

You had been on the show for twenty years. Being fired must have stung a little.

To tell you the truth, Norm and I had done Update for three and a half seasons. I felt like we had made our point. What I did like about the way we approached Update was that it was akin to what the punk movement was for music: just real stripped down. We did whatever we wanted, and there was nothing there that we considered to be a form of cheating. We weren't cuddly, we weren't adorable, we weren't warm. We weren't going to do easy, political jokes that played for clapter and let the audience know we were all on the same side. We were going to be mean and, to an extent, anarchists.

Shouldn't there be some connection with the audience? Can you be a complete anarchist when it comes to humor?

Yeah, well, that's Norm Macdonald. He does things for the experience of doing it, and he doesn't fear silence at all. Take his performance at the 2008 Bob Saget roast where he did jokes that could have come out of a 1920s toastmaster's manual: "[Comedian] Greg Giraldo is here. He has the grace of a swan, the wisdom of an owl, and the eye of an eagle. Ladies and gentlemen, this man is for the birds! [Actress] Susie Essman is famous for being a vegetarian. Hey! She may be a vegetarian, but she's still full of bologna in my book!"

One summer, when SNL was on hiatus, Norm and I read a story about a newspaper published by and for the homeless. We were improvising around that idea, doing the tough newspaper editor handing out assignments to his homeless reporters: "Edwards! I want a thousand words on going to the bathroom in your pants! You! Davis! How about a human-interest feature on urine-stained mattresses! Bernstein! Can you give me a long 'think piece' on people whose brains are being monitored by the CIA?!"

I had forgotten all about this conversation, but the first SNL episode back that fall, Norm says to me, "Hey, Downey. Remember that homeless idea we had? About the newspaper by and for the homeless? Well, I was out in LA, you know? And I was doing this benefit for the homeless . . . "

And I'm thinking, Oh no . . .

And he says, "Yeah, I did that bit for the audience . . . at this benefit, you know? And they hated it!"

He's just the most courageous performer. Norm would sometimes hang on an Update joke because he wanted to make it clear to the audience that yes, the joke was over, but we still thought it was funny. He didn't make the panic move of quickly jumping to the next joke so he didn't have to hear the silence. He wanted to give people a chance.

I'm not sure how big a fan Lorne was of our Update. I think it was probably too mean for his sensibility, and he didn't like the deadpan aspect of it. But he supported us as long as he could, bless his heart. And I stand by it. I'm proud of what we did there. Nearly all of those Update segments have been edited out of repeats, by the way.

Over the years, critics have had a strange relationship with SNL. They take very personally what they

perceive as the show's low points, almost as if a good friend has let them down.

I rememberthere was the most cretinous review of the show in the fall of '84. I will never forget this. It was a new cast with Chris Guest and Marty Short, and there was a review in People disparaging the show. Now my idea of the lowest rung in hell is to be surrounded and condescended to by idiots. In fact, I tried to write a sketch one time about that. It was Galileo getting teased by other astronomers at the [seventeenth-century] Papal Court. He'd be surrounded by these other scientists, who'd be like: "Oh, geez, Galileo! I'm getting sick to my stomach. It must be all this spinning from the earth rotating on its axis!!! Awww, I'm just ribbin' ya!" Galileo would be getting this constantly and he'd be losing his mind.

Anyway, in the People review, the critic was talking about the [October 1984] "Synchronized Swimming" bit with Chris Guest, Harry Shearer, and Marty Short. It was about two guys training for the Olympics as male synchronized swimmers. And Chris did this brilliant turn as a not-very-funny, inarticulate gay choreographer: "I've been directing regional theater . . . and if I ever do that again, I'm just going to kill myself with a Veg-O-Matic." So the People review says, "How bad is the new SNL? They do Veg-O-Matic jokes." Which, of course, misses the entire point of the reference. The lame Veg-O-Matic reference was a character joke, you fucking moron.

It seems that the sensibility of many TV critics rarely matches those found in professional humor writers. There seems to be a disconnect.

Well, I think most of them have terrible senses of humor. Tom Feran, a guy I knew in college, was the critic for the Cleveland Plain Dealer and had a great sense of humor. He always championed smart, funny stuff and always tried to get it noticed. He wasn't mean, but he wasn't the kind of easy mark for fake "genius" that gets pushed on you all the time. Most critics, though, have no sense of humor. And all of the mean ones have crates filled with humor pieces rejected by The New Yorker.

There also sometimes seems to be a disconnect between the censors for SNL and the writers. Over the years, have there been many instances in which you've written sketches that you've loved but were ultimately not allowed to air?

I can think of two: One was a commercial parody written by me, Jack Handey, Al Franken, Robert Smigel, and probably some others. It was one of the few times all of us have worked on the same piece, one that was gang-written. It was for a car called the DWI, the only car built expressly for driving drunk. We wanted to get James Earl Jones to do the voice-over: "It. Is. A. Drunk. Driving. Machine." One of the jokes was that the car keys would be gigantic. I don't remember the rest. But I do remember the network saying "Absolutely not!" And I honestly did not understand. There was nothing dirty in this piece. This was not making light of drunk driving. It was making fun of people who drive drunk. It was holding them up to ridicule; it was fighting the good fight as far as that goes. But their attitude was, Nope, we don't want any letters along the lines of "I wish I could laugh, but, you see, I lost my fifteen-year-old daughter to a drunk driver." So it's that defensive thing.

The other piece [in 1990] was called "Pussywhipped." Jan Hooks was playing the host of a talk show and there were a few male guests, one of whom was Tom Hanks, and they had to keep excusing themselves to go call their girlfriends. The piece did run, but the censors absolutely would not let us use the title "Pussywhipped." And I kept saying, "C'mon, it doesn't mean vagina. It means female-dominated." But that's where the NBC standards lady says, "Well, as a woman . . ." Which was her way of reminding me that her sense of humor had been removed at birth.

And so I lost that one, and we called it "P-Whipped" or something. I always hate it when you have to do a lame euphemism that no normal person would ever use.

Overall, though, I never really chafed under the restrictions, even when sometimes they got really crazy. One of the points I pride myself on is that I avoid anything I feel is a cheap laugh based on shock or just being dirty. You can always get a laugh, but you don't want it to come at the price of your dignity.

You wrote a sketch for an October 1990 SNL episode that's often listed as an all-time favorite from fans: a very fit Patrick Swayze and a very unfit Chris Farley compete with each other for the last spot on the Chippendales male exotic dance team. But as much as fans love it, there have been some comedy writers who have taken offense to the sketch, thinking that it was demeaning to Farley's true character.

Well, I don't think they understood what I thought was funny about it, and what the audience liked about it. I think they read it as just making fun of the fat guy dancing. But, to me, what was crucial was that Farley wasn't the least bit embarrassed. To me, it was all about the reactions from the judges. The whole point was that not only did they make Chris audition in the first place, but then the judges took the time to patiently explain, at great length, why they were going to choose Swayze over him.

Does it upset you when other comedy writers are critical of your pieces?

No, not really. We disagree sometimes. I know there was another piece I wrote with Jack Handey that a few writers hated; it was the one [that aired in October 1989] about Dracula, played by James Woods. It was the one piece we ever did on the show that dealt, however indirectly, with AIDS. Dracula would engage his female victims in conversation, subtly sounding them out about their sexual histories before he sucked their blood. If I remember the specific objection, it was the kind of instance when writers don't like an idea because they can imagine a hack version of that idea. I suppose you can conjure up a vision of a bad comic out there doing "Hey, how about Dracula! What with AIDS, he's probably asking to get a blood test! Am I right?!" But that's not what this piece was. You can turn any idea into a hack version of itself, but sometimes comedy writers just go crazy with overthinking these things.

Sometimes the audience just wants to laugh.

They do, that's right. But sometimes writers overlook this. Not performers, though. If the audience is laughing, they're happy.

Do writers and performers on SNL tend to write different styles of sketches?

I think so. Writers tend to write ordinary people in weird situations. Performers tend to write weird people in ordinary situations. That's a broad generalization, but it's fairly true.

With a performer-written sketch, often the criticism that will come from a writer is that the situation is something the audience has seen a million times. And it often bothers the pure writer that audiences don't seem to mind. As writers, we get so frustrated: "Why don't those people—that is, the audience—object?" Writers are much more interested, and maybe even obsessed, with originality. We sometimes treat comedy as a science, where advances are made, and we must always move forward, never backward. So that once something has been done, it should perhaps be built upon, but never, ever repeated. For performers, the fact that something has been done before is, I think, neither here nor there. For writers, it's a real problem, and sometimes we can tie ourselves up in knots worrying, "Is this too similar to that other thing?"

As for me, I wish originality were prized more highly by audiences than it is, but I have to say it doesn't seem to be that important to them. I think we need to be ahead of our audiences, but not so much that we lose them. Figuring out the right balance is everything.

I suppose it can always be taken too far in the other extreme: the repetition of characters to the point of overkill.

Writers tend to be very resistant to repeating characters. We always feel that it's somehow unethical, that it's cheating. "I did that piece already. What? I'm going to do the second version of the same piece?" Generally speaking, you do the best jokes the first time around. Now, it's true that over the course of the following three months, you'll think of jokes that if you'd thought of them at the time you would have put in the first version—but there's usually only one or two of those. From a writer's standpoint, not enough of a reason to do it again.

I haven't written a lot of those recurring pieces in my career. Most of what I do is topical one-off things. I have written tons of presidential addresses, but they never involved the same comedy premise—at least, I hope some of them didn't.

One idea I did write a few times was The Chris Farley Show. That was basically putting Chris Farley, the real Chris Farley, on stage in a structured way. I did it the first time when Jeff Daniels was guest host [in 1991], and Lorne kept asking for another one. But it seemed to me such a one-off thing. Lorne finally said, "Well, if you won't do it, I'll ask someone else." And I said, "No, I want to at least control it." So we did it two more times, once with Martin Scorsese and again with Paul McCartney, in 1993.

I must say, none of this seems to bother performers at all. They'll tend to go and go and go with essentially the same sketch until someone makes them stop. We've all seen repeat pieces on the show that are basically the same sketch spray painted a different color, but with the same dynamic, same jokes.

As a writer, I would love to say it's all about the writing. But like the way good pitching beats good hitting, good performing can lift a mediocre premise, and bad performing can sink the best-written piece.

Lorne Michaels has called you the best political humorist alive. In 2000, you coined the George W. Bush–ism "strategery," which many people mistakenly came to believe was actually uttered by the president himself. But there's been some criticism over the years that you lean more right than left. I think it goes without saying, of course, that this criticism tends to come from those on the left.

In the political sketches I write, I think I just go where the comedy takes me. I honestly never want a political agenda to be the leading edge of the piece. I want the piece to be funny, but only because it's based on an observation that I think is fair to make and that no one else is making. I don't think anyone could ever accuse me of going for clapter. And what's sometimes even better than the laughter is making audiences laugh when they don't particularly want to, or when they're not sure that they should.

Can you give me a specific example?

Well, in 2007, I did a couple of debate pieces with Hillary Clinton and Obama that were generally perceived as being pro-Hillary. Our audience, meanwhile, was probably 95 percent pro-Obama.

One fellow SNL writer, who shall go unnamed, criticized you for that particular sketch. He thought that you were promoting Hillary over Obama.

To me, what was funny about that situation was that, for years, Hillary had been very much the official candidate of the media, even right up to the announcement of her candidacy. She was like the wife who put them through dental school, and suddenly they dumped her for the hot, young hygienist, Obama, the trophy wife. And the change in the media was so quick and so extreme. To me, what was funny was Hillary thinking, "What the fuck? Two months ago everyone loved me!" It was like the media was doing to Obama

what Monica Lewinsky had done to Bill Clinton. And now Hillary was in the same spot all over again. When I write these sketches, I want them to be fresh in comedy terms but also something that resonates: "That's true, that's true." As opposed to something I know damn well reflects the viewpoint of 90 percent of the audience but what would feel to me like cheating or ass kissing: "Well, about time someone took on Big Oil!"

I like to think that unless you're making an observation, and that observation is true—and I hope fresh—it's not worth writing a piece. I'm not saying that I always have a particularly original observation to make, which is why if I had my druthers, I'd write fewer political pieces. For me, this is more about the characters in politics than politics itself. It's about the human aspect of these people we don't usually get to see; the way a person would react in these situations if they were in any field but politics.

Can you give me some examples of sketches, political or otherwise, you've written over the years that you thought would kill with an audience but ended up bombing?

There was one [1985] piece I wrote with Jack [Handey] that absolutely destroyed at the table and then just played to exquisite silence from the audience. It was called "The Life of Vlad the Impaler." And it was [fifteenth-century ruler] Vlad the Impaler's wife, Madonna, gently trying to explain to Vlad why he was so unpopular with his subjects. This came as a terrible shock to him, and he was really stunned and hurt. He couldn't understand why. And her theory was, "I really think it's the impalings." "What?!" "Yeah, they really hate them." "Are you sure?" "You know, Vlad, they try to tell you. You don't listen."

God, it bombed. Absolute silence. We figured, Well, maybe they don't know the story of Vlad the Impaler. [Laughs] Maybe they don't know whatimpaling means. Anyway, Larry David called to say how much he liked the piece, which was enough for me.

Here's another one: It was when Bob Newhart hosted in May 1980 and he loved the piece, which was also enough for me. The sketch began with one of those Civil War scenes you've seen a million times. I saw it as recently as Black Hawk Down. Officers are walking through the wounded tent, and there's a boy soldier dying. "You're going to be okay, son. You'll be back with your regiment in no time." "You don't have to lie to me, Major. I'm gut shot. I know I'm a goner. But I want to ask you one thing. Will you write my mother and tell her that I did my duty, that I was a good soldier?"

Everyone's tearing up. The music is somber, and the officer, played by Newhart, says, "I'll do that, son. Don't you worry." And then the kid dies and you dissolve to a series of Civil War–era photographs and music, with the graphic "Three Weeks Later." When we come back, we're in Newhart's tent, which he shares with Bill Murray, a fellow officer. And Murray asks, "Hey, did you ever write that kid's mother?" And Newhart sheepishly says, "Not yet, but I'm going to." "Geez, it's been like a month!" "I'll get to it, I'll get to it!" And the rest of the piece was more dissolves to "Three Weeks Later," "Six Weeks Later," and so on, and Newhart still hadn't written the letter. By now, Bob is suffering from writer's block. "See the problem is, I've waited so long that now I can't just write 'Your son was a great soldier. He died a hero.' It's got to be better than that." He was trying to come up with good ideas. It was like someone putting off a term paper.

I think the opening of the sketch with someone dying, particularly a young person, chilled the audience from the start.

One thing I've noticed over the years is that when SNL airs sketches with graphics—particularly graphics that express the passage of time, such as "Three Weeks Later," "One Day Later," whatever it may be—these sketches tend to confuse the audience. At least, the audience in the studio.

It does take the audience out of the sketch. The only way the studio audience for the Civil War piece could know about the passage of time would be to see the graphics on the monitors. But there was nothing about that piece that suggested to the audience they had to watch the monitors and not the stage. There were no special effects, so most watched the live action.

Do you think the home audience responded differently to that sketch?

I think the home audience would have liked that piece a lot more. But I still think the biggest factor was that the audience felt, Ooooh, a sixteen-year-old kid died.

Is it true that you discovered the legendary and reclusive comedy writer John Swartzwelder, who later wrote more episodes of The Simpsons—fifty-nine—than anyone else? He's the Thomas Pynchon of the comedy world. I think there are only a few known photographs of him.

I was head writer for Letterman at the time [1983], and we would read unsolicited joke submissions. [Producer] Merrill Markoe showed me this small postcard and it was from Swartzwelder. It had just a single joke on it. It went something like: "Mike Flynn's much-publicized attempt to break every record in the Guinness Book of Records got off to a rocky start this week when his recording of 'White Christmas' sold only five copies."

I just loved the shape of that joke. I became obsessed with it. John had signed the card but had left no address. Nothing, just his name and a Chicago postmark. So I began a desperate attempt to track him down. He wasn't in the Chicago directory, and this was way before the Internet. So I went to the New York Public Library and looked up big-city phone books for Swartzwelders, figuring that there couldn't be that many. I found his mother's number in Seattle. She said, "Yes, that's my son, John. He's at an ad agency in Chicago."

I got in touch with John and set up a meeting with him and Letterman, and it was one of the most spectacularly awful interviews in history.

What happened?

Swartzwelder shows up just as we finished taping for the day. Chris Elliott says to me, "Hey, this guy is here to see you." I went to say hi to John—I had never seen him before—and he's a really imposing figure, about six foot eight, standing there in a navy peacoat, like Randy Quaid in The Last Detail. At the time he looked like a combination mountain man/biker/Edmund Kemper [1960s and '70s necrophiliac serial killer]. He had a droopy mustache and long, greasy hair, and he was just a real presence. He was carrying a little 1930s-style hip flask. And he asks, "Is there a kitchen here?" "Yeah, down the hall. I gotta run and do something, but I'll be right back." I took longer than I thought, and when I come back Swartzwelder is gone. Chris tells me, "I think he's in with Dave." "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. No, I needed to talk to him first!" Dave is a wonderful guy, but he's a very private person, and it's important that people be warned not to come on too strong when meeting him.

So I ask Chris, "How long has he been in there?" "I don't know, about five minutes." I run back to Dave's office and Swartzwelder is sitting there, making himself completely at home. I want to say he had his feet up on Dave's desk, but I'm not sure. I am sure, however, that he was both smoking and drinking, a move not recommended in the Dress for Success guidebooks. Meanwhile, Dave is sitting there stiffly, like an orderly at a mental institution trapped alone with a patient. Swartzwelder is holding forth, as I recall, about his views on television, which amounted to everything on television was shit—including, I think, much of what we had done on our show. Dave looks over at me and his eyes tell me "no way."

He wasn't hired at Letterman, but we did bring him to SNL for a year [in 1985], and then he went on to do

legendary work at The Simpsons. I'm sure that he preferred the freedom of writing for animation over writing for live action. He's a brilliant guy, although I haven't seen him in twenty years.

Have you ever felt constrained within the parameters of the sketch form? Have you ever had the desire to write for the big screen or, perhaps, long-form television?

No, not really. I kept retooling myself and changing the kinds of things I did. I wrote SNL sketches and then I did Letterman for a few years, which is a totally different thing, and then I returned to SNL and was writing new types of pieces. Then Update was something different all together. More recently, I was just writing political material and it was a change because I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. Within that, I also had the chance to write filmed pieces or live performance or whatever.

I really am conscious of the fact that I have been very fortunate. There are certain moments when I felt that better decisions could have been made on the show, but in the big picture I feel I have been treated very well, a couple of firings aside. Because SNL is a variety show and because it's ninety minutes long, there is always plenty of room to maneuver. I never got bored with doing the same thing or getting stuck in a rut. I could always go back and retool. Like certain bands do when they just emerge with a totally new kind of sound.

Your attitude seems to be a rarity. It seems that most TV comedy writers constantly yearn to write for the movies. It's almost as if they have a chip on their shoulder, that television is too small.

Actually, I'm glad you said that because I honestly feel that TV is a better form for being funny, generally speaking, than movies. I have never really seen what it is that movies give you that makes things funnier. I think that the smallness and the immediacy of TV—where you can do something on Saturday based on an event that happened on Wednesday, and where the important elements aren't overwhelmed by the scale and production—is great. There are limitations that TV has compared with movies—especially live TV—but I don't think they're the important ones in the scheme of things.

If you look at movies many SNL performers have participated in over the years, you can't help but wonder why there's any appeal at all. Is it purely the money?

I guess it's just that for their whole lives some people think you do TV in order to get to movies, and that therefore any movie is better than everytelevision show.

I think it's fair to say—as a general matter—that most of the people who have been in the cast of SNL did their best work on SNL. Or they do good movies, but it isn't any better than what they did on the show. For example, I think Will Ferrell is brilliant, and I love him in his movies, but I don't think he is any funnier than he was on the show. Same with Kristen Wiig in Bridesmaids, or Eddie Murphy. And, of course, some people have done much worse than they did on the show.

I think you're always going to see more odd, original comedy on TV than you will in a movie. I love the Hangover films, but weird, eccentrically funny stuff is usually going to appear on TV or online. Tim and Eric. Portlandia. Reno 911! [Stephen Merchant's HBO series] Hello Ladies. Brilliant.

When have you laughed the hardest over the years at SNL?

Um, let's see. . . . Damon Wayan's audition in the fall of 1985. He was doing two kids on a playground. "Your mother is so fat you have to grease her up to get her through the front door." And the other kid's responses keep getting more and more deadly serious: "Yeah, well, your sister had a baby when she was only eleven!" . . . Ben Stiller pitching me a sketch idea in the spring of 1989. I was laughing so hard I fell on the

floor. He was improvising a character, a college kid on spring break in Florida—his name was Jordo—being interviewed on MTV, asking his parents for money. . . . Phil Hartman at a table read doing Mace, his psychotic ex-con character with a hair-trigger temper. I couldn't breathe I was laughing so hard.

All of those examples took place off the air.

Funny, I never thought of that. There's something about being right there, seeing it fresh before makeup and wardrobe. And seeing it for the first time. After that it's only the audience that gets to see it that way.

As for moments on the show, I'd say Dan Aykroyd doing Julia Child. Bill Murray doing Nick Rails, the entertainer on the auto train to Orlando, Florida. Eddie Murphy doing James Brown's Celebrity Hot Tub Party. Fred Armisen's character, Nicholas Fehn, the political comedian with no material. Maya Rudolph doing the national anthem at the World Series with every conceivable grace note and gimmick. And Will Ferrell doing his "Get off the shed!" guy.

How about beyond Saturday Night Live?

Probably Team America, the British Office, or The Simpsons. Sarah Silverman. The stand-up of Chris Rock. Any number of Monty Python or Phil Hendrie bits. S. Clay Wilson, a seventies comic artist known for disgusting but hilarious sex and violence. And any phone conversation with Jack Handey or Andy Breckman, who's written for SNL and Letterman and created Monk.

You just mentioned Phil Hendrie. Can you talk a bit about who he is?

Phil Hendrie had a syndicated radio show [based in Los Angeles] which, in its golden age, from 2000 to 2006, was to me the most consistently brilliant and original comedy of the last generation.

Hendrie did about forty different voice characters so beautifully performed that he could interview himself in character on radio with half the listening audience unaware that only one person was talking. The fake "guests" would be involved in outrageous situations which would get angry listeners phoning in to complain, and a brilliant three-way conversation would ensue with Phil playing the voice of reason and refereeing the fights between the callers and himself in character. The performance, the writing, and the improvised elements together made some of the best comedy I have ever heard.

Bill Murray is a fan. The Simpsons writers are huge fans—I'm told they would stop their rewrite sessions to listen to the show. Eric Clapton is a gigantic fan. Phil Hendrie is my comedy hero.

What advice would you give to young writers hoping to make a career out of writing sketch comedy for television?

Comedy is a hard thing to teach, and the work aspect of it is not fair in many ways. I mean, you can spend hours and hours and focus and hard work and pain, and a piece will still not be good. There's no equation where the result is in proportion to the effort. But it has to start with a funny take on something, one that's special, that you've never seen before. I've known funny people who don't write particularly well. The non-comedy parts of the writing may not be all that fresh or interesting, the grammar and vocabulary may be shaky, but all that can be handled later. That can be handled later. It's just mechanics. What you must have is a funny sensibility. You also need confidence to communicate what it is you do that's different from what everyone else is doing.

And then it's a matter of exercising the muscles, hanging out with like-minded people, being out in the world and having experiences. It's not that you have to stand to the side and observe, but everyone notices things as

they go through life and everyone has experiences. All of these will matter at some point in some way.

I'd also say to writers that when you're starting out it probably helps to work with other people. Choose a group where you can make a contribution while they get to know you, as opposed to doing it all by yourself and just walking in with the finished product. That's the entrepreneur's way. "I'll own it, it'll be a hundred percent me." But because of that it may have flaws that limit its acceptance. As an approach, it's probably better to be collaborative. Also, it's good for your confidence, and for others' confidence in you, because they begin to think, Oh this guy's good.

It can all be nerve-racking. There are few things in white-collar life where you're more vulnerable than when you drop a ten-page script on a table and it's read cold by a room full of people and the piece eats it. It's terrifying to go through, especially when people are trying to be nice. And you always get that one guy, that one wiseass, who says, "Ooooh! That one rolled foul!" That kind of thing. I don't want to say it toughens you up, but I respect anyone who goes through it.

Which is why I think it's important—and I'm going to sound like an industrial psychologist here—but I think it's vital for a show to create a zone where writers can try different ideas out without the fear of being made fun of or even giving a shit. And that's why, when I used to read writing submissions, I would ask a writer to give me three pieces, and make one of them something that only he thought was funny. The other two could be something everybody liked. Just make one piece something that you've been unable to convince anyone else is funny but that you believe in. I want writers eventually to produce work that no one has seen before and that is definitely only them.

A good writing staff is one where you can look around the room and say, "This guy does this thing better than anyone else" and "She does that thing better than anyone else." It's not necessary that everyone scores the same amount of points on every outing. But at the end of the year everybody on the show has had some success, something that could not have happened without them—whether they wrote it all by themselves or just contributed. I don't mind taking chances, and I'm less worried about a bad piece than about missing a great one.

Writing comedy is like the high jump, where you get three tries at each height and the misses aren't held against you, or shouldn't be. So you're judged by the best you're capable of. You have to figure out how to clear that height each and every time.

Most of the time. [Laughs]

ULTRASPECIFIC COMEDIC KNOWLEDGE
TERRY JONES
Writing for Monty Python

Can you remember the first joke you wrote?

The first joke I can remember coming up with by myself—not necessarily writing, but creating—was when I was about four or five. My family and I were sitting around a table. My granny asked all of us, "Does anybody want more custard?" I raised my hand, but instead of giving her my plate, I handed over my table mat. She poured the custard all over the mat. Everybody turned to me and said, "You silly boy! What did you do that for?!" It taught me at a very young age that comedy is dangerous business. If you try to make people laugh and they don't, they can become very, very angry. People do not become angry if you're writing a tragedy and you don't do a good job. But people get extremely angry when you create comedy that isn't funny—or, at the least, with the comedy they don't find funny.

Did you always know you wanted to write?

Yes, since about the age of seven. I was always writing poetry, which tended to be terribly gloomy. I think my family got worried at some point. I was a compulsive writer. I've got essays I wrote when I was very young; my granny kept them. I used to write poems and huge, long essays for that age. Just writing, all the time. There was a wonderful teacher at school, Mr. Martin, who would read out my essays to the class. I loved that. That gave me a great base. It gave me confidence. But Mr. Martin left, and it was then that I began to hear different things from teachers. I would be told, "You can't make a living as a writer. The best you can hope for is to become a teacher."

Do you think there's a connection between poetry and comedy writing?

I think there is a great connection, actually. The [nineteenth-century poet] Robert Browning, in essence, said that you can take three separate ideas, and from those three, you produce not a fourth idea, but a star. I've always found that lovely. It's a somewhat similar theory with comedy. But the difference is that with comedy you take different ideas and put them together and you produce not a star, but a laugh. There's a magical element to it.

Can you give me an example from Python where vastly different ideas were combined to produce a laugh?

Mike [Palin] wrote a [1970] TV sketch called "The Spanish Inquisition." I think that's a very good example of taking separate ideas—twentieth-century locations and Spanish Inquisition priests—and producing a star. How did Mike go from England in 1911 to then having three torturers from the fifteenth century burst into the sitting room and announce, "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition"? Where did he make that connection? And how did he make it work? In the end, you get a laugh. But when you reverse-engineer it, it's quite hard to follow how he came up with the original spark, the original idea. And yet it still works.

Now that I think about it, there's another similarity between poetry and comedy: distillation. Both have to be distilled. For both poetry and comedy, the words, the concepts have to be boiled down, and the essence is what you want to say.

It was tremendously difficult to keep up that level of quality with Python. We made it a point to end sketches when they might have just been beginning on other shows. Writing was very serious business; we took it very seriously. But it did take a lot out of us.

Michael Palin has said that the six members of Monty Python worked together to produce a harmony that they couldn't have produced individually. This reminded me of something I once read about the 1960s vocal group the Mamas & the Papas. Individually, they had four distinct voices, but when they sang together they produced a fifth harmony—almost another distinctive voice—which they nicknamed "Harpy."

That's a good image, actually. I think that's true. The six of us produced a harmony that was somebody else. We'd write together, and we were almost writing for this seventh voice. There was always that image of another voice that was there. It was the Python voice, really. And it couldn't quite be duplicated with any other combination—or alone. With Python, we had a lot of different minds at work, and we worked very well together.

I rewatched some of the early Python TV episodes from 1970, and I noticed that the crowd was very quiet for the first few episodes and only seemed to grow more and more animated as the series went on.

For the very first show, the audience consisted of a lot of old-age pensioners who actually thought they were coming to see a real circus. They were a bit puzzled. By the end of the second and third series, two years later, we actually had to take a lot of clapping and laughter out of the shows. We had to speed up the shows. I think people got used to it by the end of the first season. There was a great doubt whether the BBC would actually commission another series [season]. We were lucky they did, actually. They hated the show—until they were told it was funny and it was good.

That wouldn't happen today—executives not being happy with a show, but leaving it completely alone and providing the show time to find its feet.

With Python, the writers were completely in charge, and this was very unique. We were the only people writing for us, so we had a certain strength. We knew what we could perform. We knew what we couldn't.

With the BBC, we didn't start off with any problems, but we soon faced some difficulty with the censors. We wrote a sketch [for the third series] called "The All-England Summarize Proust Competition." It was about a beauty pageant where contestants, instead of impressing judges with singing or flute playing, would attempt to summarize the works and philosophy of Proust. And this was one of the first instances, if not the very first time, that the word "masturbation" was ever used on television. Graham [Chapman] was playing a contestant. The host of the pageant, played by me, asked Graham what his hobbies were, and he said, "Well, strangling animals, golf, and masturbation."

The BBC edited out "masturbation." Keep in mind, the BBC was okay with strangling cats. But masturbation was definitely out. [Laughs] If you watch the edited sketch, there's a lag time after Graham says "golf." His lips move but you can't hear him say "masturbation." And then there's a huge laugh from the live audience. But this is puzzling to the home viewers. It sounds like the studio audience is laughing at "strangling animals." It becomes even stranger.

Would Python overwrite? For instance, I've heard that the original script for The Holy Grail was much longer, and that only about 10 percent of the first draft appears in the movie.

Yes, we'd usually write a lot of material, or at least pitch material, and then cut down. The first draft of Holy Grail was much longer. The first half took place in the present day. Arthur and the rest of the knights found that the Holy Grail was being sold at Harrods [department store, in London]. You could findanything there. But we ultimately decided to have the entire film only take place in the Middle Ages.

For Life of Brian, we had a few scenes that were cut. One of the original ideas was for it to be the story of the thirteenth apostle who missed the last supper because his wife had invited friends over to eat back at their house. That was changed. We spent a lot of time on rewrites. Not so much for Meaning of Life, but certainly for the first two films.

We were talking earlier about how comedy is often created by bringing disparate ideas together. You wrote a scene for The Meaning of Life that might just be one of the strangest scenes in the history of film—at least for a comedy. I'm thinking of the Mr. Creosote scene, played by you (in what I would assume, and truly hope, was heavy makeup). A gigantic man, dining in a very fancy restaurant, vomits until he explodes.

[Laughs] Well, for that one, I just sat down and wrote a sketch in the worst possible taste. In fact, at the top of the paper it read: "Sketch in the Worst Possible Taste." The first time I ever read that in front of the rest of Python, we had just eaten lunch. No one liked it. That was not the time to do it. It was decisively rejected. But then a month later John [Cleese] rang me up and said, "I'm going to change my mind about this." I think he spotted that the waiter could be very funny. It was John who came up with the "wafer thin" line and to

offer the mint to Mr. Creosote just before he explodes. That's the only sketch I ever co-wrote with John.

The Mr. Creosote scene took four days to shoot. On the fifth day, a wedding took place in the ballroom where we shot it. That wasn't a set! The fake vomit was Russian salad dressing, and some other food ingredients. By the fifth day you can imagine the smell. And the poor people getting married had to come into that stench. Not a good way to start off the married life.

Fellow Python Eric Idle has called The Meaning of Life a "kind of a punk film." Do you agree with that?

I think so. I think that might be accurate. But it was really no different from how we always wrote. We weren't concerned with making anyone but ourselves laugh. And that's clear in the Mr. Creosote sketch. I mean, we certainly weren't pandering with that sketch.

Nor with the "Fishy, Fishy" sketch, also in The Meaning of Life. The sketch consists of you, dressed in a tuxedo, with drawn whiskers on your chin, waving large double-jointed arms. Meanwhile, Graham Chapman is dressed as a drag queen. And there's another character wearing an elephant head. All are looking directly at the camera, asking the audience for help in finding a "fishy."

I was surprised with that one. I pitched it and was shocked after it was voted in. I was totally surprised by that vote. Each of us had different styles of comedy. Mike and I would write, I suppose, zany sketches. John would write bits more having to do with character and human nature. This sketch was silly, with no greater purpose. So it was sort of extreme, and we didn't always agree on extremes. But when we did fight, it was always over the material. It was never personal. Or mostly never personal.

What's amazing about Monty Python's Flying Circus is just how close those original TV shows came to being erased by the BBC.

That's true. The BBC came very close to erasing all of the original Python tapes, at least from the first season. What happened was that we got word from our editor that the BBC was about to wipe all the tapes to use for more "serious" entertainment—ballet and opera and the like. So we smuggled out the tapes and recorded them onto a Philips VCR home system. For a long time, these were the only copies of Python's first season to exist anywhere. If these were lost, they were lost for good.

This happened quite often with BBC comedy shows from the sixties. It happened with Spike Milligan's show from the late 1960s, Q5. All those shows are gone—or mostly gone. It happened with Alan Bennett's [1966] show, On the Margin. It happened with a British TV comedy series from the late sixties,Broaden Your Mind, a show I worked on before Python's Flying Circus. All these tapes are gone. They were taped over in order to record sporting events.

Comedy shows from the fifties, sixties, and seventies were often erased in order to save money. It happened in the U.S. with the first eight years of, as well as with shows featuring the comedian Ernie Kovacs. And it happened, as you were just saying, in the U.K. with many BBC comedies. But how much, exactly, was the BBC saving when they would reuse these tapes?

I don't know. I would guess around one hundred pounds per tape reel.

So to save roughly $150—in today's money, at least—the BBC was willing to erase original comedy that could never again be duplicated?

If they'd been wiped, I don't think we'd be talking now, actually. Python wouldn't have been discovered in

America. And we might not have made as many series for TV. And we may not have created any movies. It goes to show how tenuous history is. It can go in any direction.

Which direction would you recommend young comedy writers head?

If you want to create comedy, try to make people laugh. If you can make people laugh, head in that direction. If nobody laughs . . . well, that's not good news. [Laughs] Head in the opposite direction.

PURE, HARD-CORE ADVICE
DIABLO CODY

Screenwriter/Director, Juno, Young Adult, Time and a Half, Sweet Valley High

I couldn't have grown up less connected to Hollywood. I lived in a very conservative Polish-Catholic community in the south suburbs of Chicago. I went to Mass and received communion six mornings a week. The idea of a "professional writer" was a fantasy. My parents told me that I couldn't write for a living, that it was just a hobby some people had outside of their real jobs. I love my folks, but they're the two most practical, risk-averse people I've ever met. As a result, I truly appreciate Hollywood. It's full of grandiose, insane dreamers with entitlement complexes. Some people find that obnoxious, but to me, it's fun. I never knew characters like that growing up. I never knew anyone who said, "I deserve to be famous." In Hollywood, that's every other person you meet! God bless these douchebags.

I'm really lazy, and I'm not proud of that. I'm usually just thinking about what I'm going to have for dinner. People say, "There's no way you're lazy; you have such a steady output of work." But writing isn't work for me. I enjoy it. If it felt like work, I wouldn't get past page two. That's why I have difficulty relating to a lot of comedy writers. They might seem rebellious on the surface, but a lot of them went to Ivy League schools and are ambitious people-pleasers at their core. I've always been straight-up lazy and defiant. I wouldn't last a week at Harvard, or at SNL for that matter. It would be like, "What can I write that Lorne will really hate?"

When I first decided to try screenwriting, I was seeking inspiration from small, offbeat films. I think this is a good way to start. I knew if I read the script for say, Armageddon, it wasn't going to connect. I was a nerdy, chubby chick on the fringes, so of course [the 2001 comedy film] Ghost World appealed to me. As I started experimenting with my own voice, I found myself interested in suburban misfits like Enid Coleslaw [from Ghost World] and like those characters in Napoleon Dynamite and Lester Burnham [the Kevin Spacey character] from American Beauty. They didn't have to save the planet to be interesting. Their stories were accessible to me. And Ghost World was funny, but also melancholy in a way that resonated with me. I think that tone has informed a lot of the stuff I've tried to write.

Always be working on your own material. Write specs [non-commissioned, unsolicited screenplays]! Though I've been hired to write studio projects, everything I've ever gotten produced has been an original spec script that I just wanted to write on my own. I wasn't being paid for them. Other people's ideas are never as important as yours. I wrote Young Adult while I was supposed to be working on a shitty studio movie, and I'm so glad I prioritized my own idea. Make everything as personal and specific as you can. Sometimes people bitch about, for example, certain screenwriters who make their writing too specific to their own lives, not realizing that that's why it works! The specificity is what makes it brilliant.

We're lucky enough to live in an era where you can write, produce, publish, and distribute your own writing through the magic of the Internet, so there's no excuse not to be creating. Just keep writing. If you really love it, you'll keep doing it even if you're not successful. If you don't love it, you don't belong here.

MIKE SCHUR

If you want to understand the creative nuts and bolts of Michael Schur—a writer for such NBC comedy institutions as Saturday Night Live, The Office, andParks and Recreation—you should probably read novelist David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel, Infinite Jest. At least the first thousand or so pages of it.

Schur didn't just enjoy Infinite Jest. It's in his bloodstream. While a student at Harvard University, he wrote his undergraduate thesis on the novel and somehow persuaded Wallace to travel to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to receive an award from the Harvard Lampoon. (More on that later.) In 2011, Schur directed a video for the Decemberists' "Calamity Song," which featured teens playing the fictional game Eschaton, a reference to Infinite Jest. And an episode from Parks and Recreation written by Schur—"Partridge," which aired April 4, 2013—was brimming with Infinite Jest references. Schur also owns the Infinite Jest film rights. So you can rest assured that if there's ever a movie adaptation of the least filmable book ever written, Schur will be at least somehow involved.

Schur has a popularity that extends beyond those who read the closing credits of sitcoms and enjoy excessive footnotes. Most people would recognize him first as Mose Schrute, the quiet, bearded cousin of Dwight on NBC's The Office. Mose co-owns a beet farm with Dwight, thinks it's fun to throw manure, loves Jurassic Park (he has a pair of Jurassic Park pajamas to prove it), and has suffered from recurring nightmares ever since "the storm." Mose is Schur's creation—he named the character after Mose Gingerich, one of the stars of the 2004 reality series Amish in the City—and one that, for better or worse, has become his most visible mainstream identity.

But there's another, entirely different audience for Schur. Mindy Kaling, a writer and actress who collaborated with Schur for many years on The Office, knows a very different man than most of the world has seen. "The greatest gift you can give Mike Schur is a Swedish dictionary," she said. "Because he just loves nonsense words, which [is] like a toddler sensibility for a guy who is an Emmy-nominated writer and one of the most well-read, serious guys." Schur enjoys broad comedy, Kaling said; as proof, she pointed to one of her favorite Schur-penned Office episodes—"Dunder Mifflin Infinity," October 4, 2007—in which Michael Scott, played by Steve Carell, blindly follows his GPS and maneuvers his rental car straight into Lake Scranton.

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